

9-21-2011

Current

Virginia Pfau

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.rit.edu/theses>

Recommended Citation

Pfau, Virginia, "Current" (2011). Thesis. Rochester Institute of Technology. Accessed from

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Thesis/Dissertation Collections at RIT Scholar Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses by an authorized administrator of RIT Scholar Works. For more information, please contact ritscholarworks@rit.edu.

Rochester Institute of Technology
School for American Crafts

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
In Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts

CURRENT

by Virginia Pfau

September 21, 2011

CHIEF ADVISOR:.....Richard Hirsch
Professor, Ceramics, School for American Crafts,
Rochester Institute of Technology

ASSOCIATE ADVISOR:.....Michael Rogers
Professor, Glass, School for American Crafts,
Rochester Institute of Technology

ASSOCIATE ADVISOR:.....Tybre Newcomer
Visiting Assistant Professor, Ceramics,
School for American Crafts,
Rochester Institute of Technology

CHAIRPERSON:.....Donald Arday
Chair, School for American Crafts,
Rochester Institute of Technology

AUTHOR:.....Virginia Pfau
MFA Candidate, Ceramics,
School for American Crafts,
Rochester Institute of Technology

I, Virginia Pfau hereby grant permission to the
Wallace Memorial Library of RIT to reproduce my thesis in whole or in part.
Any reproduction will not be for commercial use or profit.

Table of Contents:

ABSTRACT	1
CHAPTER 1: DEVELOPMENT	6
CHAPTER 2: SOURCES AND RESOURCES	10
CHAPTER 3: SOME THOUGHTS ON THESIS INSTALLATION	15
Man and Nature	15
Materials	16
The Snapshot	18
Cropping	19
Time	20
The Light	21
CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION	26
Works Cited	27
Image List	28



ABSTRACT

I am fascinated by the relationship of modern humans to the natural world, and the ways in which the technology we produce has both positive and negative impacts on it. I want to use my work to create a non-biased, beautiful environment in which others can also contemplate this subject. Clay is an important material not only for its elemental symbolism of earth, but also for its long ties to human craft and culture. Plastics are advanced synthetic materials with various ecologically constructive and destructive aspects in a field with increasing emphasis on environmental sustainability. The synthesis of these two media is technically and aesthetically intriguing to me. I think that creating an installation with them is a good way to construct an atmospheric setting in a gallery space.

For my graduate thesis, I propose to make an installation exploring the dialogue between man and the natural world. I plan to use the gallery space at the Hungerford Building to create an environment resembling a river, with “rocks” formed from clay and inlaid with plastic sheets. I will experiment to incorporate clay from the Genesee River into the sculpture clay body I use to form these rocks to bind the work deeply to the location. They will emit light through the translucent plastic, creating an atmosphere of contemplation in the room. I plan to control the direction of passage of the viewers through the gallery installation on the night of the show opening. The people who pass through the environment I create will be a vital part of the work, and I plan to have a video camera in the room to record the passage of the visitors through the gallery in a time-lapse sequence. In the end, I propose that the video of the people passing through the installation be the final work of art in concurrence with the gallery show. I want to try to achieve a synthesis of nature, craft, technology, viewer, and time. In this thesis show event and in my research and making of the work, I want to gain and share a better understanding of our relationship to the world around us, and a heightened awareness of the impermanence of our moment in it contrasted with the lasting effects of our actions here.



I started with the river,
digging mud.

I made the mud to clay,
the clay to stones
like those I saw in walks along her banks
but not the same:

the plastic is man's touch upon the world,
the light: integrality.

I composed a river
and put it for you here,
so that in passing through these waters
frozen in time
you become the current.

I ended with the river.

(thesis show artist statement)



DIGGING THE MUD,

I REALIZE:

- ☐ I am just digging mud.
- ☐ I am not just digging mud.

CHAPTER 1: DEVELOPMENT

When I entered the MFA program at RIT, my previous experience with ceramics materials had been primarily involved in the making of functional, wheel-thrown pottery. My intent was to explore this familiar material and its inherent natural properties to make new statements through sculpture. I began, as so many MFA Ceramics students before me, with the wall project. I decided right away I wanted to use light, and was challenged by Professor Hirsch's statement that ceramics was not the most logical material to make a wall light from. I responded to his objection by adding Plexiglas to the equation, sculpting a topographical landscape layered with splayed light in its plastic elevation lines, as well as several acid-washed cast resin parts. The piece was relatively successful, but the only aspect I wasn't entirely happy with was the hand-sculpted nature of it. I had used my hands as tools to create the forms and textures of the mountains, but the entire time I beat and shaped and stroked the surface of the clay I was aware that I was really just trying to imitate on a small scale the work of the water and wind erosion that forms real mountains.

The second quarter of my first year, I set out to further explore actual water erosion on raw clay to see where I could take it. I bought a 6-setting hose sprayer nozzle from Lowe's, and set up a "Weatheration Station" in the back mop-sink, creating small hurricanes that textured and bored through solid clay forms resembling stones. I ended the quarter by making another landscape- this time in 9x9 tiles made of 4 different clay bodies marble-wedged together and sculpted in part by gravity and my hand, and in part by the wearing of the sprayer. Over half of these tiles blew up in the kiln, but I was able to salvage a few to set up for a final critique outside in the snow. I was pleased with the semi-accidental weathering marks the water sprayer made on the surfaces and through the colored layers, and also the ambiguous scale of the piece that could have been either a micro or macrocosmic landscape.

In the third quarter, I decided to further study plastic as an element to combine with my clay sculptures in harmonious opposition. I wanted to study and use plastics partly because of my aversion to the material, its properties, and its environmental impact, its disposable uses and cheapness in our modern world. I realized that clay, to me, was symbolic of the natural world because it is earth, and plastic was a logical choice as a symbol of mankind's technological advancements. I was also intrigued by the challenge of putting together two materials that do not go together easily. I had become somewhat of an adhesives expert in my first project, and worked to become a plastics expert in my third. I requested and received a special study in the

Packaging Sciences department, visiting their laboratory once a week to experiment with the thermo-forming machine, a technology used since the early 1960's to create plastic packaging products including bottles and blister-packaging. I liked the fact that the materials and vacuum forming technique are familiar to the general public through everyday use, and that I could use it in a new way to make people re-examine the disposable packaging and containers around them. I thermo-formed copies of the surviving landscape tiles from the previous quarter, and learned to create a "double-draw" by first forming a layer of the opaque white plastic over the tile, then trimming it and forming a layer of clear PVC over that. The first draw was much more detailed than the second, which created a visually interesting layering effect. This technique, impractical to the packaging world, had never been done before in that lab. By the time I left my study there, the students were experimenting with drawing plastic forms on a number of new materials. I hope I didn't get anyone into too much trouble...

During my studies in the Packaging Department, I also experimented with thermo-forming plastic over solid balls of raw, dried clay mud I had dug from the banks of the Genesee River near a boat dock in Rush. I formed the plastics over them, then put them back in the stream and the river to wash the mud out. I video-recorded this erosion process in time-lapse mode on my new video camera, and digital video became another new element of my work. I lit these plastic shells by placing solar-powered LED lights inside them, and projected the video of their erosion onto the wall on which they were displayed. I also put LED lights into the plastic copies of the landscape tiles, and displayed them in a grid format opposite each other in a corner. My goal had been to make the plastic and clay elements equally beautiful, and to my own satisfaction I had succeeded at this, but when the landscape piece was displayed again at a group gallery show, I realized that this was not the case for most other people. Visitors from the Craft School were much more drawn to the clay tiles, and the designers preferred the plastic ones. Everyone seemed to have a favorite. Then my friend pointed out to me that the way they were displayed necessitated a comparative judgment because they were displayed in opposition to each other and not integrated. This idea intrigued me, and when I showed the piece a third time in a juried exhibition, I cut down the number of tiles to only 12, and mixed the lit plastic pieces in among the ceramic tiles. I decided then that I wanted to integrate plastic and clay together even more seamlessly in my thesis work, as materials symbolizing earth and technology, integrated together just as we are unable to clearly separate the truly natural environment from the traces of our human presence in it.



WHO WAS THE PHILOSOPHER
WITH THE QUOTE ABOUT THE RIVER?
HE SAID WE CAN'T STEP
INTO THE SAME RIVER TWICE
BECAUSE THE RIVER WILL HAVE CHANGED
OR WE WILL HAVE
(I think).

CHAPTER 2: SOURCES & RESOURCES

When I was 20 years old I spent a year as an exchange student at Cambridge University in England. During that time, I was quite interested in Art History and was considering a career in museum work, so I spent one term doing an internship at the Kettle's Yard art gallery. Kettle's Yard is a beautiful house that belonged to Jim and Helen Ede. Mr. Ede was a curator of the Tate Gallery who had connections to many well-known modern artists. He and his wife arranged their entire house according to their tastes with natural objects and gifts of sketches and sculptures from their friends. Eventually the house was donated to the university with the intent of it becoming a space for students to appreciate art. The condition of the house and its contents was preserved, and a gallery space was added onto it for rotating shows. During my time at Kettle's Yard, one of my duties was to re-organize the books in the small library on the upper floor. It was during this task that I first came across a book about the artist Christo. There were several volumes on his work in the collection, and I was fascinated by his approach to visual art. During that time I had been trying for a while to make up my own definition of Art. I decided that Art was "anything a human makes or does that causes others to look at the world around them differently." Up until then, I had only encountered art in its more traditional painting, drawing, sculptural and musical sense. It was a radical thought to me that art could be made in the "real world" simply by changing the appearance of things.

The second fortunate encounter in my time at Kettle's Yard was the opportunity of assisting with the installation of the show "Mono Ha: The School of Things". I had the honor and pleasure of working with Kishio Suga, Nobuo Sekine, Koshimizu Susumu, and Lee Ufan, as well as their small team of assistants to arrange their works within the gallery space, several of which required the installation of two yellow squares of English sandstone so enormous it took 8 people to wheel them in on load lifters. The nature of the Mono Ha work was very "primal": forms derived purely from materials, well-integrated into the exhibition space so that the space became part of the work, rather than a mere venue for its display. It was a completely new concept to me that one could simply collect stones and balance them on crossed steel cables or build large, formless mounds of oil clay in a gallery and call it "art". It felt almost naughty, like cheating, like it was way too much fun to be serious artwork. I was very young at the time, caught up in the whirlwind of studying abroad, and the full impact that experience had on me didn't sink in until quite recently, until I was working on my thesis and it all flooded back to me. I decided back then not

to pursue a career in museum work, but it wasn't until years later that I ventured into sculpture myself. The honesty and simplicity of the materials, the integration with the space, and the careful, seamless innovation of these things had a great influence on my work at RIT.

In researching for my thesis work, I started with the "Earthworks" artists of the 70's, people like Robert Smithson and Richard Long, thinking their work would relate to what I felt I wanted to do, but as influences, they became a research springboard more than anything. The time for their movement had long passed, and the work felt as if it didn't relate to mine in the way I was seeking. I turned instead to new resources: Andy Goldsworthy, Maya Lin, and Giuseppe Penone. These artists are not necessarily more recent than the Earthworks artists, but they were new to me, and their work and approach to working seemed like the type of inspiration I sought. Andy Goldsworthy has an incredible patience, ingenuity, and purity to his work. I can directly relate to his desire to make art about nature in nature and of nature. Maya Lin, whom I had only known of through the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, surprised me when I came across the catalogue from her "SYSTEMATIC LANDSCAPES" show. I was enamored with the way she filled the gallery with works made of simple, raw materials, the forms of which were often inspired by quite high-technology methods of interpreting the landscape.

Giuseppe Penone, often grouped in with the Italian Arte Povera school, impressed and inspired me not only with his use of materials and natural themes, but also with his poetic writings about art and nature. His art is about the encounter between man and the natural world. It is about sight and skin, about our place within the landscape. His work is simultaneously impulsive and patient, each idea carried out with the material appropriate to its end. All of these artists share a subject matter and a serenity of response to it that I hope to also portray in my work. All of them make work that requires great effort, skill, and sometimes engineering that is not quite visible in the final product.

"The water's condition is horizontality,
the sculpture's condition is verticality.
Raising up the water is a poetic movement.

The water's condition is formless, the sculpture's condition is form.
Giving form to the water is a poetic movement.

The water's condition is fluidity, mutation,
The sculpture's condition is solidity, permanence.
Giving solidity to the water is a poetic movement.
Raising up the water to drink it is a vital necessity, visualizing this event is
Building something similar to us."

-Giuseppe Penone, 1976

My reading studies brought me around again to Lee Ufan. Mr. Lee graduated from the Philosophy Department at Nihon University, and has a simple yet deeply philosophical connection to his artwork. He writes that "High mountains and large waves are elements of externality that directly impinge on the body before they become esthetic elements through the operation of reason. In an Eastern manner of speaking, a power that transcends their defining qualities plucks at the strings of the heart. Prior to rational structuring and interpretation, one is moved by their resounding effect on the body. This does not mean that beauty and sublimity reside in the objects themselves, or that they are internal products of human imagination. They are categories produced by encounter with the outside world, events that emerge from phenomenological relationships." (Lee Ufan, 1982-1998) I, too, wanted to make sculpture that affected the body as well as the mind. I wanted my visitor to have the sense that they are an integral part of the installation. I wanted them to actually be an integral part.

I think that my MFA thesis work is a continuation of the line of thought that all these artists also walk. I wanted to use my own preferred materials to explore my perception and understanding of the landscape. Perhaps because I have lived in and visited so many different places, I am deeply inspired and connected to the place I am in. I want my art to be relevant to the location and culture of my surroundings. I think that by being a newcomer to a place, I have un-jaded eyes with which I can explore and express a surrounding overlooked by its modern inhabitants. Humans have made art about nature for as long as they have made art, but it is ever-changing in technique and subtleties of theme and purpose. I wanted to explore and express the general forms of water flowing over stones that could specifically relate to the Genesee River.

"Art increases our sense of what it is to be alive, to be in vital relation to the world we inhabit. Such a relation comprehends what art reveals: the inescapable transience of things. We are aware, as never before, that we are part of the world, not privileged observers of it." (Mel Gooding, 2002.)



GRAVITY.

the river draws borders
the river divides the land
we divide the land
we interpret its forms, its dips and peaks
the river flows from peak to valley,
dividing up the land by natural rules:
gravity, erosion, persistence, terrain
we use the lines,
the lines, the maps and lines.

CHAPTER 3: SOME THOUGHTS ON THESIS INSTALLATION

MAN AND NATURE

I am primarily interested in expressing how man interrelates with nature through technology in my current body of work. I think that scientific and technological developments greatly affect the way our culture interacts with and has an impact on the natural world, both for better and for worse. Recent studies into issues such as climate change, natural resource availability and use, and the extinction and endangerment of species have brought a sense of concern to our society about the effect our contemporary way of life has on the natural world. There are many cultural and commercial trends championing the “eco-friendly” lifestyle and products associated with it. The endless production and consumption model of society that started with the industrial revolution has begun to take a new direction in line with these concerns.

Many new developments in science and technology have furthered our knowledge of the natural world. Scientists continue to make new discoveries and better understand old ones, and all the while such information has never before been so accessible to the public. At the same time, however, it seems that the majority of people are becoming less and less connected with the natural world around them because of technological developments that allow them to, in a sense, escape reality. It is easy to view satellite images of ancient pictographic mounds in South America via Google maps on the internet, but the average person isn't intimately aware of the path her drinking water takes to get into her glass. “Separated from our roots, from the organic body of which we are a part, from the sources of life, from the rhythms of the planet, from a sense of the sacred rhythms of the planet, from a sense of the sacred relationship between human beings and the rest of life, living in our concrete artificial environments, we have effectively become like astronauts in space: afloat, unconscious, uprooted, adrift, living in our own abstract homocentric reality, utterly dependent on technology for sustenance, survival, and knowledge” (Jerry Mander, 1994).

With my thesis work on the Genesee River, I did not want to make a strong statement for or against our technology and societal trends, I simply wanted to raise awareness, to ask a question about how we view and interpret the natural world around us. I wanted to make the people of Rochester newly aware of the river that has flowed through this land since long before the city was ever founded. My thesis work is not just about the Genesee River, either. It is about all rivers. I made my forms from local mud, but their composition suggests any number of possible

river segments around the world. We can only truly understand what we experience first-hand. The pieces of river I made stand for all waters that flow from source to sea.

MATERIALS

The two primary materials from which my body of thesis work evolved are clay and plastic. I am fascinated by the history of clay, the directness of its manipulation and the centuries of development through which it has passed into its current innovations of use as a sculptural material. Clay symbolizes earth to me, because it simply is that. It is dirt. I made my clay body out of 50% mud I dug directly from banks of the Genesee River. It fires to a beautiful deep purplish-brown, with a subtle self-glazed finish above Cone 8 temperatures.

My sculpture deals with materials as they are. Through the years I have experimented with many ways of decorating ceramic surfaces, but any surface treatment that hid the clay felt fake to me, as if the clay were valuable merely as a gessoed canvas for painting, a form to be hidden beneath a shell, to look like something different finished than when it was formed. I wanted the clay to be simply as it was. I wanted the pieces to be the same whether they were whole or broken. Such an approach seemed honest and poetic to me. I used water-power to add texture and holes to the hollowed out stones. I was able to partially control the designs the water made as it was sprayed onto and into the wet clay surfaces, but only partially. As a natural material, I wanted the “rocks” to reside somewhere in between a man-made and a natural, accidental appearance.

I chose plastic to symbolize our technology. I believe that Plastics is one of the most important, most all-pervasive inventions mankind has ever put forth. To better understand plastics, I had spent a quarter doing a special study in the RIT Packaging Sciences Department. I knew that the plastic I used in my sculptures had to be familiar enough to be recognizable and comfortable to the audience, but I also was aware of how difficult it would be to choose the right material. Many choices would be more connotative of litter than anything else. I wanted the plastic elements to be both visually pleasing, and emotionally neutral. One of the reasons I chose to work with plastic materials at RIT is my own personal aversion to them. I felt that plastics were cheap, over-produced, and very harmful to the environment. My studies of current development in eco-friendly plastics and bio plastics proved to me otherwise. Plastic is an excellent material choice to show how the inventions and interventions of mankind can affect the natural world in either positive or negative ways depending on how they are produced and used.

I used hydrostone plaster to create the flow of water around my stone compositions. This material was chosen for its properties as well as its wet-working similarities to clay slip. I originally tried to make the water from ceramic slip, but was unsuccessful in the drying and firing stages. Hydrostone was a much more appropriate material choice for the process I developed of using gravity to build up a flow-like texture around my pre-fired stones with only partial control. I wanted the lines to appear natural and effortless, but also for the viewer to wonder how such pieces were made.

I chose to make stands for the large sculptural tiles to elevate them to a comfortable viewing level so that visitors could easily view the intimate details without effort. I wanted the pieces to appear to float, but also to be stable enough in appearance that no one was afraid to get close to them. I learned to weld, and built steel legs and low wooden shadow-like pedestals for the pieces. All these materials, except the wood, which was painted to match the steel, were also left in their original material states with no surface treatments except to prevent the steel from rusting.

The lights inside the sculptures shone out through the plastic bulging through the stones' holes with a pulsing, bluish light that occasionally contained a hint of pink or yellow. This was achieved through the use of programmable LED lights controlled by small computer chips. The wires and power systems (rechargeable batteries) were purposefully hidden from view, so that the highest technology aspect of the sculptures was the least easily understood. I wanted the pulse rates of the lights to go along with the apparent speed of the water for each piece, and also to suggest a living thing or spirit.

The two-dimensional print-making aspect of my thesis show was also composed of clay and plastic. I silk-screened digital close-up photographs of the sculptures with a mixture of acrylic paint and river mud onto a semi-opaque, milk-white Plexiglas. Each image was broken up into smaller components to accommodate the size limitations of the thermofax machine. The individual screens were laid out in a grid pattern on the surface of the large plastic sheets during printing, and overlapped slightly to make an effect similar to Japanese laquerware gold leafing.

I suspended the prints from the ceiling via steel cables through hollow metal tubing fixed to the top of the prints in a configuration mirroring the arrangement of the sculptures in the first half of the gallery. They floated like banners or brush-painted scrolls.

THE SNAPSHOT

All of the sculpture tiles were made, cut apart, and arranged to appear as if they had been cropped out of a larger whole, much in the same way we compose and keep snapshots. We live in an image-saturated world. The image is now easier to produce, store, and share than ever before, and has become so inherent to our daily lives that it is almost entirely taken for granted. I believe that the snapshot is so ingrained in our subconscious mind, that we cannot help but compose a cropped image of the environment around us when we look at it. I think it has changed the way we see the world. We cannot take in everything at once, so we naturally select our point and scope of focus, much the way a photographer composes a photograph through his lens. The sculpture half of my installation was composed of rectangular and square tiles, some in diptychs and triptychs, arranged to visually connect to a larger whole that was not seen. It provided specific focal points I could share with the viewer.

The Plexiglas print half of the installation was a series of actual photographic images. I silk-screened close-up digital photos of light and shadow compositions within the sculptures that I found visually pleasing. I cropped out new compositions with the camera, and processed and printed them in such a way that they were semi-ambiguous and one step further removed from the actual riverscape. These prints were to appear to the viewer after he had passed through the installation of sculptures in the first half of the gallery to resonate as lingering memories of what he had seen there. The Plexiglas sheets were semi-transparent, so once the viewer had passed through the series of prints hung from steel cables, he could turn around to see an even softer, fading memory of vision.

The cropping and composition of both the sculptures and the prints were influenced by the Japanese aesthetic I explored during my years there as an English teacher and then as a traditional ceramics student. I visited many Zen gardens, and was struck by the strength of the spaces between the stones. I realized that the careful arrangement of presence and absence within a space creates both an overall energy and a flow of concentration of the viewers' attention from one point to another through a composition.

I like to think that the way I work is a little bit similar to Japanese Haiku poetry. Haiku is a very direct, concise form of writing, in which the author shares an event that created an emotional stir within his chest directly with the viewer as aptly as he can express it in mere words. He does this hoping that through the skill of his expression, the audience will understand and the same emotion will also stir in them. In Western literature and poetry, we love to describe how something made us feel, or use our words to elicit a certain emotional response from the audience

by describing the experience to them with many adjectives and adverbs, to suggest to them how they ought to feel about it. Haiku is much more pure and immediate.

I experience something that makes me stop and wonder. I cannot share the direct experience with you, though I may want to, so I use words as a tool to portray as clearly and truly as possible the most important elements of the experience, knowing that whoever reads my words, no matter where he or she may be in time or place, he is also human, and through our mutual humanity will, therefore, more than likely share my emotions about the experience as well. I want to make sculpture like this. I feel strongly about the natural world, about its beauty and importance, its mystery and elegance. Images and sculptures are more direct than words, but sometimes the simplest thing is also the most difficult. For my artist statement, I wrote a poem. I did not want to tell the viewers what to think or feel. I did not want to force certain ideas or emotions within them. I just wanted to express something I find beautiful and important in my own way, hoping that the viewers would also find it so, or at the very least interesting to look at. The entire installation was a single integrated work of art that can also be separated into discrete elements for focus.

CROPPING

I deliberately arranged the compositions of stones in each individual tile or grouping before pouring the hydrostone that bound them together. This was partially out of necessity, as the stones had to be fired before the pour, and also those that appeared to have been cut in half were done so before the firing. My arrangements were informed by my sense of spatial harmony, the parameters for each piece (such as many small stones in a fast-moving current, or a single large stone in slow water), and also by the way I had observed the hydrostone to move, draw lines, and build up texture in each previous piece. The compositions were to echo the Japanese rock garden aesthetic. I wanted them to appear balanced within the “negative space” of the hydrostone current, but also to look natural and not overtly composed. My entire thesis was an attempt to ride the boundary line between things that are man-made, and things that are natural and purely accidental. I wanted to achieve the seemingly effortless skill of a maker so in-tune with her materials that nothing seems forced, though it may in fact be difficult, complex, and carefully planned out.

The cropping of the tiles was pre-arranged because I decided in advance the size parameters of each piece in order to set up a composition within it. I wanted the pieces to appear as if they had each been cut and lifted out of an actual river in different areas of it, and

as a result to activate the spaces between the sculptures with the energy potential of what would have been there in a real river. I wanted the viewers to feel a part of the installation as they moved through it. I wanted them to fill the negative space, the potential space, and become the moving current of the river among the frozen fragments that were my sculptures. I also wanted to create a sense that though the river was fragmented in my installation, it was in no way broken, so I arranged the tiles in a more or less uniform spacing within the gallery, and aligned the logical flow of their current with the direction the visitors would travel through the room. In the way of the Japanese garden, it would appear to have been carefully arranged, but also natural and harmonious with nature, and it would also appear that there was more to the composition than met the eye, that the space was completed by the viewer, the idea, and the larger world from whence it came.

The Plexiglas prints were directly cropped compositions of the sculpture pieces. I photographed the compositions using the “white-board” mode on my digital camera, a format that strengthens the light and dark contrast of an image into pure black and white pixilation that resembles an old xerograph photocopy. I uploaded the images to a computer, and used editing software to further crop the composition to print proportions and break it down into manageable parts. In the sculpture compositions, I arranged the elements within the parameters to create a composition. In the prints, I moved the camera’s eye to select a composition within the already formed arrangement of stones and hydrostone lines. Thus I created the two series through production, consumption and reproduction of the work.

TIME

Along with the sense of scale, I wanted to work with the sense of time within the installation. The sculptures and prints were essentially frozen in time, though the hydrostone lines and the lights inside the rocks gave suggestions as to the speed of the current in each piece. The viewers moving through the space, and their flowing and eddying were the actual speed of the river. They were the living embodiment of the river’s current.

I am interested in geology, and rocks fascinate me partly because the idea of time, to a stone, is so mind-bending. These rocks are thrust up from the earth’s processes, and over thousands, no, millions of years. They are fragmented by water, by weather, and broken down into smaller and smaller pieces. By the time they reach the river, they have been shattered and dulled by the earth, and the water then has its full reign to grind and polish them into the soft, weighty orbs of the stream, the small pebbles of the swift river, and eventually the sands of the

deltas and the sea. I imagine time as a stone, the slow grinding of the years, the patient weathering and wearing, the speed of the passage of time for everything else: the waters flow by, the seasons change, the plants and animals grow and wane and grow and wane around you. Stones, to a human, are close to infinity.

I recorded the passage of shadows over the final sculpture in my installation. I did this partly to reaffirm to the viewers that they were in fact an integral part of my installation, and that their movement through it was the current. I projected a real-time image of this video frame over my artists' statement in the opposite corner of the room so that the viewers would realize this. The video was the most difficult element to work to my satisfaction, because I am not as familiar with the media, and also realize that people react to the presence of cameras in a manner that is undesirable to the harmony of the gallery. I did not want people to react to the camera at all, but felt it was necessary to inform them that a camera was present, partly out of respect, and also because I felt they would be even less comfortable with the camera in the room if they did not know it was there and then suddenly became aware that it was. I recorded the footage for two separate hour-long periods, and edited them later into a stylized flow of shadows over the piece that reflected the idea of a current. I had to edit out some hand-shadow animals and things like that, because although people did not seem uncomfortable with the idea of the camera recording their shadows, some took it as an amusement. It was also, therefore, a distraction.

Part of the reason I chose to record the shadows was to give the piece a new life and movement. I wanted to create a situation where the gallery show was not the be-all, end-all of the thesis work. The video of the installation was also a separate final product. This caused the visitors to my show to flip roles from viewer, to subject, to viewer once again when they saw the video projection. It actually made them part of the work. The projection of the video was somewhat small and weak, due partly to my chosen projector and location, but also perhaps to some lack of confidence in my ability to handle the medium as strongly as the more physical aspects of my work. I was wary of the viewers' ability to stay focused on the work equal to their role within it as defined by the live camera element. I will continue to use video and time-lapse photography elements in my future work, but it is definitely an area in which I need to acquire more skill through practice.

THE LIGHT

The lights inside the stones served many purposes. They were partly used to add an element of new and growing technology to the work. Their pulsing glow gave movement and

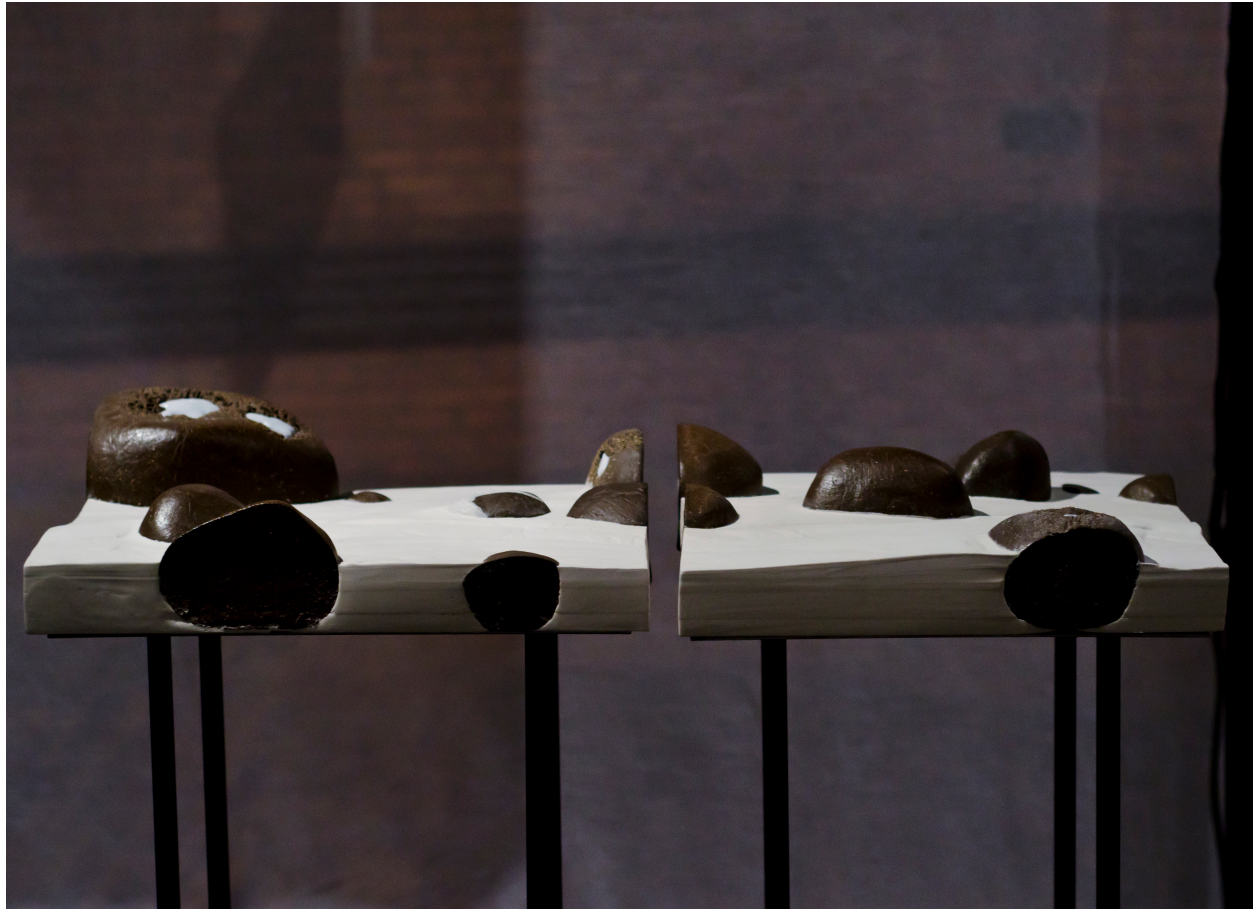
speed to the pieces. They added an aesthetic element in that the pieces looked different with them on and off, as they changed the appearance of the light and shadow on the hydrostone lines, as well as gave the viewer the realization that the stones were in fact hollow, causing them to become more mysterious and less weighty.

The light was also symbolic. To me, it represented enlightenment: the ways we try to understand and interpret the natural world through science, technology, exploration, spirituality, and the arts. I believe that enlightenment comes to us when we are able to fully realize our true place in the world, and open up to our greatest potential as humans within that role. I think that the reason that environmentalism and new developments in resource use, environmental care and regulation, and low-impact living have risen so much in popularity in recent times, is that we are becoming more and more aware of the impact our present lifestyles have on the world and how that can affect not only the future of the natural world around us, but the future of our own species as well. I wanted to raise an awareness of this aspect of our current culture without becoming preachy or obviously biased. I wanted to show the viewers how I see and interpret the natural world through my visual voice.

The light is spiritual. It is the life-force inside all living things, the pulse that binds them together and creates a harmony of all their voices. It is the flow of water from the sky through the land to the sea, over and over again. It is the breath and heart-beat of every living thing. It illuminates our minds. No matter how advanced we become as a species, we can only understand a limited scope of aspects of the natural world through our scientific study. I believe that we are attuned to understand the other parts through something that is beyond science, a drive and desire within ourselves to be a harmonious part of nature, to fill a role within it, to experience it first-hand. Humans are the “care-takers” of the environment only in that we are the most advanced scientifically and the most powerful technologically, and therefore have the greatest impact on and power over the world. This power comes with the responsibility to use it wisely and carefully. I don’t think there is a single human who desires to cut down a rainforest, cause a living species to become extinct, or destroy a place of great, wild beauty. These things have all been done out of apparent necessity or hidden greed. We are becoming more and more aware of the effects of our past and present impact on the environment, and are striving to build new understanding and equipment to undo past harm and prevent future damage to our greatest resource and our home.

The light was the element that meant the most to me, but was conversely the aspect I wanted to leave the most open to interpretation for the audience. The more important I feel a

conceptual element to be, the less I want to force it into someone else's frame of thought. I think viewing art is about discovering and exploring, and even if the idea the audience leaves with varies from the intent of the artist, it is still a successful work. Art is a form of communication that is simultaneously more explicit and less precise than the spoken or written word. Rather than describing to you an idea, I can actually show you, but our visual language has a vocabulary much broader in choices of aesthetics and style, material and its use, than the list of words we use in everyday speech. This leaves it more open to response and understanding drawn from the life-experience, personal history, and tastes of each viewer via different emotions and ideas. Art is a language that goes beyond dialect, but is still influenced by local culture in its making and its interpretation. This is why art is so wonderful. This is why art-making is so hard.



just
WE ARE ALL Y RIVERS
LONGING FOR THE SEA.

CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

During the opening night of my thesis exhibition, at least 350 people passed through my installation. I feel that my arrangement of the pieces in the two halves of the room with the fabric screen between them was quite successful in giving a flow and eddy to their passage through. I was pleased that each visitor paused to inspect the intricacies of line in a piece, and many seemed mesmerized by the pulsing LED lights. Even with the crowds that at times packed areas of the gallery, I believe that the installation sustained a sense of calm.

The weakest part of my thesis work was the video element. The real-time projection did not have a very strong presence in the room, and many people did not even notice it. I would like to continue to use video elements in my work, but I need to develop the confidence with that medium that would enable me to give it a position of equal footing to the physical work.

I was quite satisfied with the arrangement within the gallery space and the balance of the two halves of the room with the semi-transparent screen between, which allowed viewers to see vague forms and shadows of one half from the other. The arrangement of the print area served as a mirror and a memory of the sculpture area. I feel that the installation used the specific gallery space very well.

It was a big step for me, coming from a more practical background in making and selling functional pottery, to move to large-scale, nonfunctional, virtually unmarketable installation sculpture. I am happy that in this genre I was able to fully express the things I could not in my pottery work, but also realize that it will be much more difficult to create a livelihood of this type of work. I do plan to continue on this path of sculptural installation about nature, and want to branch out into even more multi-media and materials in accompaniment with clay. The thread of this series I am most excited to pursue in my future work is the idea of having only partial control of most aspects of making the work. I want to continue to explore the effects of gravity, erosion, and other forces on my materials. I love approaching ceramic sculpture as a science experiment. I want to learn even more about various modern technologies and integrate them into my artwork.

“The flow of the river is ceaseless
and its water is never the same.
The bubbles that float in the pools,
Now vanishing, now forming are not of long duration;
So in the world are man and his dwellings.”

-Kamo No Chomei, HOU-JO-KI (1212)



Works Cited:

p. 11 Giuseppe Penone, *Giuseppe Penone Writings: 1968-2008*, ed. Gianfranco Maraniello and Jonathon Watkins (Italy: MAMbo, Bologna, 2009), 87.

p. 12 Lee Ufan, "Being With the Outside World," in *The Art of Encounter*, trans. Stanley N. Anderson (England: Turner/Lisson Gallery, 2004), 96.

p. 12 Mel Gooding, "Listening to the Music," in *ARTISTS LAND NATURE* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2002), 16.

p. 15 Jerry Mander, "Tyranny of Technology" from *Resurgence*, #164, May/June 1994, p. 22, in *Balance: Art and Nature*, ed. John K. Grande (New York: Black Rose Books, 2004), 49-50.

p. 26 Kamo-no-Chomei, *Hojoki (The Ten Foot Square Hut)*, trans. David Jenkins (Japan: Stone Bridge Press, 1996), 1.

Image List:

(* Indicates image printed in published thesis)

*Image 01, p. 30, Installation view from doorway, Poster: silkscreened acrylic on plastic vellum, 8"x12".

*Image 02, p. 2, Time-lapse installation view of CURRENT on opening night, river mud clay, hydrostone, plastic, programmable LED lights, steel, wood, fabric, silkscreened Plexiglas, dimensions variable.

Image 03, Installation view of CURRENT from sculpture gallery, river mud clay, hydrostone, plastic, programmable LED lights, steel, wood, fabric, silkscreened Plexiglas, dimensions variable.

Image 04, Installation view of CURRENT from sculpture gallery, river mud clay, hydrostone, plastic, programmable LED lights, steel, wood, fabric, silkscreened Plexiglas, dimensions variable.

Image 05, Installation view of CURRENT sculpture gallery, river mud clay, hydrostone, plastic, programmable LED lights, steel, wood, dimensions variable.

*Image 06, p. i, Installation view of CURRENT Triptych (#5,6,7), river mud clay, hydrostone, plastic, programmable LED lights, steel, wood, 45"x24"x77¼".

*Image 07, p. 24, Installation view of CURRENT Diptych (#11,12), river mud clay, hydrostone, plastic, programmable LED lights, steel, wood, 47"x21"x40½".

Image 08, Installation view of CURRENT sculpture (#9), river mud clay, hydrostone, plastic, programmable LED lights, steel, wood, 47"x18"x30".

*Image 09, p. 4, Detail of CURRENT sculpture (#9), river mud clay, hydrostone, plastic, programmable LED lights, steel, wood, 47"x18"x30".

Image 10, Installation view of CURRENT sculpture (#8), river mud clay, hydrostone, plastic, programmable LED lights, steel, wood, 45"x23"x16¼".

Image 11, Detail of CURRENT sculpture (#8), river mud clay, hydrostone, plastic, programmable LED lights, steel, wood, 45"x23"x16¼".

Image 12, Installation view of CURRENT sculpture gallery, river mud clay, hydrostone, plastic, programmable LED lights, steel, wood, dimensions variable.

Image 13, Installation view of CURRENT sculpture gallery, river mud clay, hydrostone, plastic, programmable LED lights, steel, wood, dimensions variable.

*Image 14, p.27, Installation view of CURRENT sculpture (#1), river mud clay, hydrostone, plastic, programmable LED lights, steel, wood, 46"x24"x23¼".

Image 15, Installation view of CURRENT from sculpture gallery, rivermud clay, hydrostone, plastic, programmable LED lights, steel, wood, fabric, silkscreened Plexiglas, dimensions variable.

*Image 16, p. 8, Installation view of CURRENT print gallery, rivermud and acrylic silkscreened on Plexiglas, dimensions variable.

Image 17, Installation view of CURRENT print (#9), rivermud and acrylic silkscreened on Plexiglas, 40"x21".

Image 18, Installation view of CURRENT print gallery, rivermud and acrylic silkscreened on Plexiglas, dimensions variable.

Image 19, Installation view of CURRENT print Diptych (#7), rivermud and acrylic silkscreened on Plexiglas, 27"x18" & 35"x21".

Image 20, Time-lapse installation view of CURRENT on opening night, rivermud clay, hydrostone, plastic, programmable LED lights, steel, wood, fabric, silkscreened Plexiglas, dimensions variable.

Image 21, Installation view of CURRENT Triptych on opening night (#5,6,7), rivermud clay, hydrostone, plastic, programmable LED lights, steel, wood, 45"x24"x77¹/₄".

Image 22, Detail of CURRENT sculpture (#8), rivermud clay, hydrostone, plastic, programmable LED lights, steel, wood, 45"x23"x16¹/₄".

Video: Time Lapse Digital Video of visitors' shadows passing over CURRENT sculpture (#8), made in two 1-hr. recordings on May 6, 2011, during thesis show opening, edited with Final Cut Pro Software by the artist.

